

Sleep Deprivation Can Shorten Your Life

Adequate sleep is essential for good mental and physical well-being. Without it, the mind and body cease to function properly resulting in symptoms such as memory loss, mood disorders, obesity, muscle deterioration, and heart disease. When you lose too much sleep, you can lose your mind . . . and even your life.

Without the right amount of quality sleep, not only do we wear out faster mentally and physically, we are also more likely to cause accidents or become victims of them. Drowsy drivers cause approximately 50 percent of fatal vehicle crashes. Sleepiness at work can lead to low productivity which can mean job loss.

How much sleep do we need?

Though some people can function well on a few hours of sleep, most of us need between seven and nine hours of sleep per 24-hour period to be at our best. Sleep patterns do change with age, however. According to the Medical Health Board of www.sleep-deprivation.com, these are the typical sleep needs for different ages of life:

- Birth to 2 years: 13 to 17 hours
- 2 to 10 years: 9 to 13 hours
- 10 to 16 years: 10 to 11 hours
- 16 to 65 years: 6 to 9 hours
- Over 65 years: 6 to 8 hours

You can determine whether you are getting the sleep you need by honestly answering the following questions:

- Can you fall asleep easily without restlessness or anxiety and without resorting to drugs or alcohol?
- Do you usually sleep through the night?
- On the rare occasions you wake in the middle of the night, can you quickly fall asleep again?
- Do you awaken naturally at approxi-

mately the same time each morning, with or without the alarm clock?

- Do you feel awake and alert throughout the day, or if you are a night worker, throughout your normal waking hours?

Why Aren't People Sleeping?

According to the National Sleep Foundation, sleep deprivation affects about half the adult population of America. Chronic inability to sleep, often referred to as insomnia, has so many causes that it is generally considered to be a symptom of other problems, much as a fever suggests some sort of infection. Here are some of the most common causes:

- Emotional stress: anxiety, depression, excitement, grief, etc.
- Distractions in a 24/7 society: all-night television, internet, and 24-hour businesses
- Working split shifts and night shifts
- Chemical agents: medications, illicit drugs, alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco
- Health issues: breathing disorders, disease, pain, hormone changes, etc.
- Environmental issues: too much light, too much noise, too hot or cold, etc.

Get more of the sleep you need

If you frequently or consistently feel sleep deprived, don't just label yourself "nightowl" and give up. Try the sleep strategies listed below.

- **Establish a consistent wake-time/sleep-time rhythm.** Get up at the same time every day, stay awake during waking hours, and go to bed at the same bedtime as often as possible.
- **Avoid mental or physical stimulation before trying to sleep.** Physical exercise promotes rest, but not if done immediately before bedtime. That goes for mental exercise, as well. Don't think

about tomorrow's to-do list before going to sleep. Instead, do something relaxing such as reading or taking a long bath.

- **Make your environment comfortable and quiet.** Adjust room temperature and bedding so you aren't too hot or cold. Keep your room dark or try wearing a mask while you sleep. Since noise can disturb sleep, try some earplugs. Some people find that "white noise" (a low-frequency, steady, monotonous humming sound) is helpful in masking disruptive sounds. An electric fan, or environmental sound recordings might help.
- **Avoid alcohol and other drugs, especially near bedtime.** Alcohol may make you feel sleepy, but it has a rebound effect that causes wakefulness. Smokers tend to wake more, possibly because of withdrawal symptoms. Caffeine makes you feel more alert or jittery. Prescription medications, over-the-counter sleep aids, and illicit drugs all carry their own list of side effects that can exacerbate sleep problems. If you have sleep deprivation issues, talk to your doctor about any medications or drugs you are using.

If these strategies don't work for you, talk with a doctor about treatments for sleep deprivation or talk to a counselor about emotional issues that interfere with the quality of your sleep.

Problems? Your EAP can help you evaluate problems so you can move toward solutions. Contacts with EAP are confidential within legal limits and are available to employees and their family members 24 hours a day.

To talk to an EAP counselor, call
(515) 244-6090 or (800) 327-4692.

Website: <http://www.efr.org/eap>

TTY: (515) 288-9022

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